

Cavs Destroy Wizards, Continue Ascent In East

Written by {ga=samamico}

Wednesday, January 23 2008 7:00 PM -

Having knocked them out of the playoffs the past two seasons, the Cavs know the Washington Wizards very well. They came to town last night, half a game ahead of the Cavs in the Eastern Conference standings, and in possession of the #4 seed. They left humiliated, and as the #5 seed. The wine and gold clicked on all cylinders, ball batting the Wiz by a 121-85 count, moving to 9-1 in the month of January. Sam Amico was there, and reports on the rout for us in this morning column.



Cavaliers center Zydrunas Ilgauskas got things started and everybody else did the rest.

That may sound strange for a team with LeBron James -- but it's what happened in the Cavaliers' 121-85 hammer job of the visiting Washington Wizards on Wednesday.

This was the kind of game every center dreams of -- lots of touches, lots of good looks at the basket, and in the case of Ilgauskas, lots of respect. And it was all good to see in a league that's become dominated by small forwards and smaller guards. As Ilgauskas proved against the Wizards, being 7-foot-3 still counts for something.

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Ilgaskas received the ball nearly every time down the floor in the first quarter, and he rewarded his teammates by making all six of his shots. He was 8-of-8 from the floor by halftime, and finished 10-of-10 for 24 points. He also grabbed six rebounds and blocked three shots.

For most of the game, the Wizards were wearing a puzzled look that seemed to ask, "Hey, when did Wilt Chamberlain join the Cavs?"

The fans also noticed, giving the man known as Big Z not one, but TWO standing ovations.

Ilgaskas may have the best shooting touch on the team, and it showed on this night. Even better, he did more than just score. He also spent some time directing traffic, passing for four assists.

On one possession, Ilgaskas had his back to the basket and the ball in his hands. He couldn't free himself for a shot, so he motioned for guard Sasha Pavlovic to cut to the basket. Pavlovic sprinted through the lane, but Ilgaskas waited for James to follow. Good decision, as Ilgaskas hit James with a short pass and James hit a short shot.

Thank you very much, said LeBron.

Ilgaskas' low-post supremacy also created the type of offense every coach loves -- namely, one that starts close to the basket before working its way out. So he also opened things up for shooters like James (23 points) and even Pavlovic (13 points, 5-of-9 shooting).

Of course, Ilgaskas wasn't alone -- as anyone can tell you, a 36-point victory

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takes a total team effort. But he was unquestionably The Man in perhaps the Cavs' best all-around game of the year.

And when you're talking about a team with LeBron James, well, who would have guessed it?

HEATING UP

The Cavs have won 11 of 13 and a season-high five straight overall.

They led this game by as many as 45 points, and committed just five turnovers as a team. They also shot a sizzling 57 percent from the floor (47 of 83).

"We drove, we passed, we shared, we moved ..." said Cavs coach Mike Brown, who saw all the Xs and Os on his chalkboard come to life for one entire evening. "We really attacked their defense."

The margin of victory was the Cavs' largest since Nov. 3 1994, when they beat the Los Angeles Lakers by 38 points.

WILKENS SPEAKS

Former Cavs coach and point guard Lenny Wilkens was in attendance Wednesday as part of the team's Martin Luther King Jr. celebration.

I had the opportunity to go one-on-one with Wilkens outside of the Cavs' locker

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room at halftime, and he told me he is impressed with the current group.

"I like what I see," he said. "I mean, what's not to like about LeBron James? He's got a great feel for the game, and the team as a whole is starting to be consistent. They could be right there again, with Detroit and maybe Boston (in the Eastern Conference race)."

Wilkins played point guard for the Cavs from 1972-74 and later coached the team during some of its best seasons ever (1986-93). He is one of only three people elected to the Basketball Hall of Fame as both a player and a coach.

This also marks the first time in 40 years in which Wilkins is not employed by an NBA team (he resigned his position as Seattle's vice president this past summer).

Wilkins just turned 70 but said he is open to the idea of returning to the league as a coach, or more likely, in a front office position.

"I would consider the right offer," he told me. "That's not saying I'd go for sure, but I'd definitely think about it."

He then added with a large smile, "Then again, I'm starting to notice that the longer you stay away, the more you start to enjoy your lifestyle."

SHADES OF THE ABA?

The scoreboard above center court at Quicken Loans Arena malfunctioned for most of the second quarter, leaving fans to wonder about the score and time remaining.

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So Cavs public address announcer had to give the score after every made basket -- giving the arena the feel of the original American Basketball Association back in the 1970s.

The faulty scoreboard made you wonder how we survived without them. Believe it or not, there was a time.

Fortunately, order was restored during the second half.

PLAYOFF REMATCH?

If the playoffs began today, the Cavs would play the Wizards in the first round (for the third straight year). The Cavs hold the No. 4 seed in the conference and the Wizards are fifth.

The Cavs have eliminated Washington from the postseason three times -- 2006 and '07, and the Miracle of Richfield year of 1976.